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## ABSTRACT

The mission of the Rochester Institute of Technology's College of Continuing Education is to provide high-quality, applications-oriented education and training for the continuing development of professionals. The college has initiated a special project called the Athenaeum. The Athenaeum is an intellectual cooperative run by and for adults over the age of 55 who are committed to continued learning. Members pay annual dues to support the organization and activities and use their own experience and talents to plan and implement college-level courses and educational experiences for themselves and their colleagues. The plan is that the adult participants will continue to run this program on their own, with the college serving only as a resource and guide when needed. The Athenaeum attempts to follow the same principles used in the lyceum of the past, i.e., it is based on a student-centered, open learning approach to lifelong learning. (MN)

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College of Continuing Education:

Athenaeum

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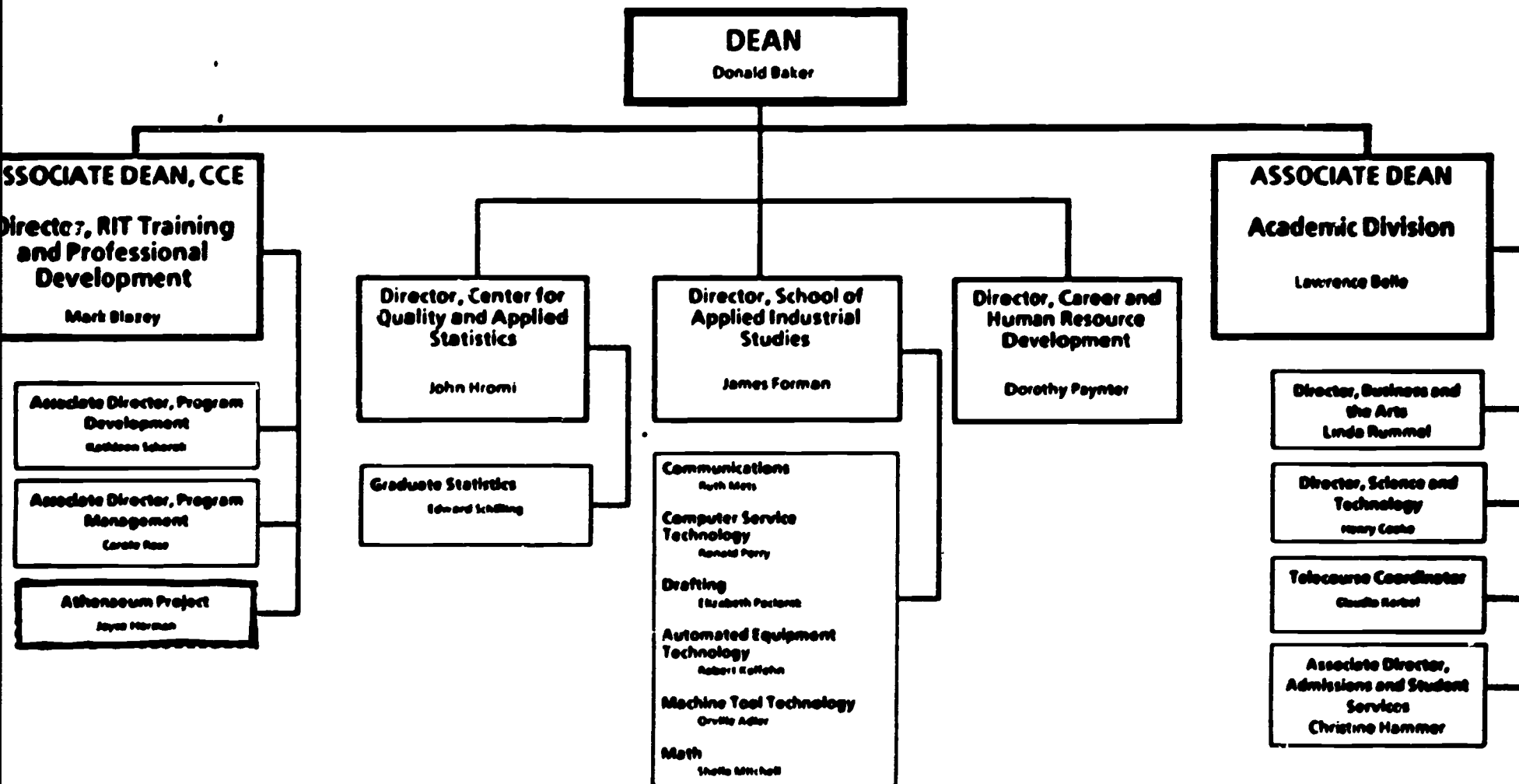
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MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of CCE is to provide high quality, applications-oriented education and training for the continuing development of professionals and emerging professionals that contribute significantly to the educational value and financial condition of the Institute.

The College offers an array of seminars, workshops, certificates, diplomas, and associate degrees as well as non-traditional bachelor's and interdisciplinary master's degrees that are at the leading edge of technology, and management development. CCE serves as the coordinating agency to develop and market non-credit training activities throughout the Institute. Through entrepreneurial approaches, the College develops innovative programs and instructional delivery systems that are responsive to the changing needs of non-traditional learners in manufacturing, service, government, and other not-for-profit organizations.

# Organizational Chart for College of Continuing Education -- May, 1987



Denotes  
Special  
Project

The College of Continuing Education (CCE) is one of nine colleges of Rochester Institute of Technology. Because this college serves primarily part-time and older students, I thought perhaps the policies governing this college would be unique. From the interview I had with Dr. Donald Baker, the dean of this college, it was apparent that the organization of the departments and the policies and governance regarding hiring, tenure, academic rank, curriculum and so forth are no different than the others. Copies of the organizational chart and mission statement are included in this paper.

The College of Continuing Education does have a unique feature. This year the college initiated a special project called the "Athenaeum Project." According to the organizational chart, the project is under the "supervision" of the director of RIT Training and Professional Development. From the brochure, The Athenaeum (1987), it states that "the Athenaeum will be run by an elected council of members which will plan and set policy. An Ad Hoc Steering Committee of members has formed to govern initial development and planning." The actual plan is that the adult participants will run this program on their own. The college will only serve as a resource and guide when needed.

The new Athenaeum will be run by and for adults age 55 or older who are committed to continued learning. Members will form an intellectual cooperative, and pay annual dues to support the organization and its activities. Those within this community of self-learners will use their own wealth of experience and talent to plan and implement college-level courses and educational experiences for themselves and their colleagues (The Athenaeum, 1987).

From the same source, it stated:

Everyone involved in the Athenaeum will contribute to its vitality. Members will develop and lead courses, be involved in the planning and administration of programs, help with office work, arrange trips, and much more.

What all of this boils down to is that the participants in this program will be autonomous. They will not be governed by the traditional RIT policies. What are the rationales for this kind of an approach to education?

There has been a growing trend in the number of non-traditional postsecondary students or adult learners. This means tremendous marketing impacts on colleges and universities, including RIT. William F. May (1978) noted that "the adult learner is right now...the new majority in American higher education. Adults, those in continuing education, graduate study and part-timers, total 10.1 million, while full-time students total less than 8 million." It is noteworthy to mention that Mr. May quoted these numbers in 1978. There is no doubt that the number of adult learners is much greater today.

It is also important to realize that "colleges and universities are not by any means doing all the postsecondary education that goes on in this country....probably 30 to 40 million adults received teaching and training of various kinds in business, labor unions, churches and the military, as well as from colleges, universities, government agencies, community organizations, agricultural extension services and free universities. Obviously, Americans have a tremendous appetite for adult learning (May, 1978)."

Adult learners are a unique population. These people are self-directed or lifelong learners and seek ways to keep up and "live with the escalating pace of change in the family, on the job, in the community, and in the world-wide society (Cross, 1981)." If one looks at the present topics to be presented at this year's Athenaeum program -- "Conflict Resolution," "The World Turned Upside Down: Changing Sex Roles," and "Comparative Religious Views of Sexual Issues" (Athenaeum, 1987), it is obvious that the

participants are seeking knowledge that is relevant to the issues they face in their daily lives as well as their major areas of interest. Brookfield (1984) said that an activity can only be considered educational if the skills developed or the bodies of knowledge required by the learners are in some way deemed innately valuable and worthwhile. Also, Wlodkowski (1985) said that adult needs and expectations for what they are taught will powerfully influence how they motivationally respond to what they are taught. The Athenaeum project is designed to give the adult participants the opportunity to explore current issues and common interests.

As much as I see the merits of this project and the contributions it could bring to the Rochester Community, I wish the project could be made available to adults of all ages instead of just for those who are 55 and older. There is a great percentage of adults who do not wish to pursue a postsecondary degree but are still lifelong learners. Adults of all ages and vocations have to deal with the "rapid major cultural changes, such as massive input of new knowledge, technological innovation, vocational displacement, population mobility, changes in political and economic systems (Knowles, 1980)." Adults in any kind of community education program can serve as valuable resources of knowledge, insights and challenges for one another. Age should not be a barrier.

Community education is a key concept and does not and should not fall into the realms of a college's traditional governance and policy. This Athenaeum is an excellent example of a community education program. As Brookfield (1983) describes it, a community is a group of people with "shared identity, mutuality and common interest." The purpose and goals of the Athenaeum uphold the sense of community or "gemeinschaft" among the adult learners where they can "perceive common needs and problems, acquire a

sense of identity and have a common sense of objectives (Brookfield, 1983)."

In the same source, Brookfield included a passage that explained the relationship between community education (such as the Athenaeum) and lifelong learning:

The ultimate goal of community education is the development of self-guiding, self-directed communities which are able to identify and satisfy the needs of all community members through the coordination, cooperation, and collaboration of all community resources.

It is not governance or the policies of Rochester Institute of technology that is the force behind the Athenaeum; it comes from the adult learners who are a part of this innovative program.

The Athenaeum itself is not a new idea. There was an earlier Athenaeum, RIT's predecessor, established in 1829 as a forum for prominent Rochesterians to share new ideas and begin new associations (The Athenaeum, 1987). Age was probably not a criteria for participation at that time. Earlier than this, there was another form of community education groups called lyceums. The first one was formed in 1826 by Josiah Holbrook in Millbury, Massachusetts (Brookfield, 1983). The same author quoted that each lyceum was "a pooling of community educational resources for mutual self-improvement."

Lyceums are associations formed for the mutual improvement of their members and the common benefit of society. Their members meet on frank, cordial, and equal grounds. All declare, by joining a Lyceum, that they wish to extend their knowledge, and from the manner in which they associate each may become, by turns a learner and a teacher. All unnecessary formalities, as well as expenses, are to be avoided, that the way of learning be rendered as free as possible. (Brookfield, 1983)



The aforementioned author went on to describe a lyceum as an andragogical, student-centered, open learning system with no prescribed curriculum. As he quoted in the same source:

The lyceum was a learner-centered operation...the members themselves determined the content of learning sessions. Learning outcomes were deliberately open-ended ... a given member would become a teacher if he possessed some particular knowledge which was judged of benefit to others. This type of experience - sharing as a means of realizing individual learning goals is at the heart of modern adult learning theory.

This present-day Athenaeum attempts to follow the same principles to the benefit of the adult community.

The potential benefits RIT's Athenaeum has to offer to this community are great. The student-centered, open learning approach should be attractive to many adults and serve as a model for other colleges and universities to follow. Places of higher learning should heed to the needs of the large market of non-traditional, adult learners as the number of traditional college students decline. Also, ages of adult learners should not be a hindrance or a requirement for participation in this kind of learning venture. Lifelong learning gives every adult the means to meet the ever-changing challenges in their economic, social, political environment and the opportunity to learn from one another.

Programs such as this do mean a departure from the traditional governance and policy of a college or university. The Athenaeum is no exception. The following excerpt from Stephen Brookfield's (1984) is a good indication of how a program of and for adult learners can work without predetermined and established curriculums and policies:

The practical and conceptual heart of self-directedness in learning is the control over learning processes and curriculum

content exercised by the learners themselves. If adults believe that the form of learning in which they do exercise control (that is, self-directed learning) is of innately inferior quality, then a belief in their own power to change their individual and social reality remains dormant. The act of learning - of deliberately choosing to acquire certain skills, knowledge or affective dispositions - must be one of the most fundamental features by which we define what it means to be fully human. It is through learning that we alter our own personhood,...or that we can reconstruct our social environment. Once adults believe that the act of learning can be undertaken without the approval or assistance of professional educators or that the locus of control can remain centered in the adult learner, then a realization is created that adults have the power to alter their individual and social environment and to create their own reality.

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